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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to bridge the gap between general and vocational education, the Postgraduate School of Education at Agder College in Norway launched a trial teacher education program in 1996 that called for prospective vocational and academic/general teachers to attend the same course. The course, which was designed to encourage students to accept a major part of the responsibility for their personal and professional growth and development, emphasized working in small groups with strong interaction between theory and practice. In addition to including general pedagogical theory and practice, the new program serves as a meeting place and arena for cooperation between the two groups of students. The following program elements are considered crucial to the new program's effectiveness: counseling of teaching practice by colleagues; linkage of theory and practice through dialogue and real-life experiences; and cooperation in interdisciplinary projects. Participants' satisfaction with the approach of working in core groups has been mixed. According to student evaluations, working in core groups has proved time consuming, conflict producing, and frustrating but also professionally enriching. To date, the new program has been most effective as a means for giving and receiving colleague counseling from both academic and vocational teachers. (MN)

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AGDER COLLEGE
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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN VOCATIONAL AND ACADEMIC TEACHERS - THE COMBINED INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION EXPERIMENT OF AGDER COLLEGE, NORWAY

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TRAINING UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS: THE COMBINED INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION EXPERIMENT OF AGDER COLLEGE

ABSTRACT

The Norwegian upper secondary education reform in 1994, Reform -94, has been nation-wide and centrally controlled. The main goal of the reform has been the provision of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 with equal access to educational opportunities. Behind this aspiration is both a wish to bridge the wide social gap that previously existed between general and vocational education and a more pragmatic realisation that a country with a declining birth rate must make the most of all potential talent present in its population.
This will have severe implications for upper secondary school teachers, both because there will have to be more interdisciplinary co-operation and because they will meet new student categories. To meet these new requirements, the Postgraduate school of education, Agder College, launched a trial program in 1996, based on two pillars: 1. teacher students of vocational and academic/general background will attend the same course, and 2. a major part of the responsibility for pesonal/professional growth and development is placed with the students themselves, working in small groups with strong interaction between theory and practice throughout the entire course. A requirement for admission to this part-time program is access to own classes.

THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHER EDUCATION

There are two types of postgraduate education for upper secondary school teachers in Norway, one for students who are qualified for teaching academic/general subjects, and another for teachers qualified for vocational subjects. Both are one-year courses if studied full-time.

The new upper secondary school that emerged after *Reform -94* is a comprehensive school, and in vocational studies, (especially) at the Foundation Course level, the students are to spend approximately 26 per cent of their school time on theoretical subjects. In these subjects the students will be instructed by teachers with an academic background, while in vocational subjects they are taught by teachers with a vocational background. This means that a far stronger emphasis than before is laid on the teachers' ability and willingness to co-operate and engage in teamwork. We are of the opinion that Norwegian teachers are poorly prepared for the new teaching and working conditions prevailing in the new upper secondary school, particularly when it comes to interdisciplinary project work, a highly esteemed pedagogical approach to learning in the new curricula designed after the reform.

Moreover, we are of the opinion that it is a condition for a successful outcome of a reform in the school system that the teachers are well prepared for the new practical and pedagogical demands that the reform implies, that they are well informed about the basic ideas behind the reform, and that they are able to assume a positive attitude both towards themselves as groups, regardless of background, and to the changes reshaping the educational system.

We feel strongly that part of the reason for the lack of a parity of esteem between academic/general and vocational education stems from the teachers' own attitudes towards each other as groups and towards the educational pathways that they represent. We think that a form of teacher education that brings these two teacher groups together has a fair prospect of breaking down the negative attitudes and uncertainties that have traditionally coloured their relationship. Collaboration in a shared teacher training environment helps them to learn to

know each other as persons and to acquire an understanding of their respective educational and vocational backgrounds.

We hope that such combined teacher education will give us a reasonable chance of building up mutual respect and more positive attitudes. If we succeed in this, the attitudes and knowledge gained by these teachers-to-be through their training may generate a general parity of esteem within the education system, and thus also convert public opinion to equal regard of academic and vocational education.

Needless to say, Reform 94 will have an impact on teacher training and teacher education in Norway in the years to come. In September 1996 a Government White Paper (NOU 1996:22) titled "Teacher Education: Between Demand an Ideal", said the following concerning the need for change within teacher training and education for the upper secondary school system: "The reforms (in the educational system, in the 1990s) lead to, among other things, co-ordination within as well as between the various parts of the educational system. In the various lines of study within upper secondary education, teachers of general/academic and teachers of vocational background will work together. The common Core Curriculum lays down the overarching and fundamental principles for contents and method in primary, secondary and adult education. This requires co-ordinated and common parts in all types of teacher education. The various groups of teachers, who will co-operate in their later careers, should, if possible, meet and co-operate while still students ..... The education (of teachers) must be based on relevant practice ..... The theoretical part of the study should be a tool for extension, interpretation and reflection around the practical work as a teacher" (p. 147).

At Agder College, we feel we made a good headstart when we worked out our trial program for a combined education for general/academic and vocational teachers in the autumn 1995/spring -96, described below.

CONTENT AND ORGANISATION OF THE NEW INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION AT AGDER COLLEGE

The combined programme of study is a trial in harmonising the training of teachers in vocational and academic subjects or lines of study. The basic idea is that teachers who are expected to enter into committal interdisciplinary co-operation as school faculty members, will be better prepared to develop such collegial relationships if they go through a harmonised programme including reciprocal, committal elements of co-operation and development work during their teacher training period.

In addition to including general pedagogical theory and practice, this programme is also a meeting place and an arena for co-operation between the two types of students. These represent in some ways very different cultures, both in terms of training and profession: the teachers of academic subjects, with their traditionally academic educational background, and the vocational teachers with their more professionally oriented perspectives and hand crafting traditions. This creates a number of kinds of differences which are highly significant for the teaching profession, including basic differences in their views of training, teaching and learning. While differences in culture (established values, ways of doing things and world view) can create problems for co-operation across traditional groupings, they also create a great potential to influence and learn from one another. It is this potential for mutual growth and development which this programme aims to promote. The goal is that the students can bring positive experiences with them to their future jobs as teachers. The following aspects are considered crucial to the (successful) outcome of the programme:

- **Counselling of teaching practice by colleagues**

At the start of the programme, interdisciplinary groups (core groups) are established with about 4 students each. The groups will have responsibility for providing guidance and counselling of each other's teaching practice. This is a very central element of a programme which is to qualify the students to work with development of other people's competence.

Each student must commit him/herself to actively contributing to counselling their fellow students and colleagues regarding the way they perform their professional tasks. The extent of this work is 4 hours every other week throughout the academic year, a total of 60 hours. During these hours each student is required to free him/herself from other duties in their teaching position. In exchange for this, the student will also receive visits and guidance on their own practice. The goal is to develop the student teachers' actual competence for their work as teachers.

In order for this arrangement to function well, the students are given a theoretical introduction to and practical training in pedagogy of counselling and counselling by colleagues. In addition, the college sets aside resources for following up the groups of teaching colleagues out in the schools. The students will have to demonstrate creativity and flexibility in order to find practical solutions to make the arrangement work in practice, and in addition they must be willing to take responsibility in their role as counsellor. It is recommended that students who cannot or who are not willing to take on such responsibility should apply for other programmes of study.

- **Theory and practice: Dialogue and real life experiences**

The unique feature of this trial programme is that while they are studying, the students are also practising teachers and thus have access to their own classes. In other words, one has access to an arena for practical testing, development and reflection over the pedagogical theories that are presented and the topics that are discussed in the seminars every other Thursday and Friday. One of the fundamental ideas behind the trial programme is to exploit this opportunity to the fullest extent possible in order to develop the students' actual competence as practising teachers.

The same core groups of students that are involved in counselling each other as colleagues also provide the starting point for the practice-oriented innovation work. Based on the ideas from the theoretical instruction - combined with issues and challenges in each student's class or teaching situation - problem areas which one wishes to work with further will be defined.

- **Co-operation in interdisciplinary projects**

During the first year of study the core groups of students that are the basis for the counselling by colleagues will conduct an extensive interdisciplinary project as part of the programme to qualify them for interdisciplinary co-operation in the school.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In sum, our expectations to this part-time teacher education project are that it will have both short- and long-term effects. In the long run, we hope to contribute to a more down-to-earth and also more relevant teacher education, but as of today, we know nothing of any such future effect. What we do know something about today is how the students have experienced the program and the reflections of students and teachers half-way through the entire process.

1. What is the student experience with the effect of the work in core groups?

Originally, all groups were positive to this way of organizing a major part of the work in the program. They felt that this would be exciting, challenging and give a fairly easy workload on the individual participant. The experiences so far are the opposite: this has not been easy. Project work with people from different schools, with different professional backgrounds, has been very demanding. Some groups have functioned well. Even if time-consuming, they have managed to reach an agreement on various questions, and a common platform and understanding of how to do things. Also in these groups there may have been great variations as to professional competence and world view, but people have been willing to listen to each other and accept the fact that sometimes you have to compromise. (student report -97)

None of the groups say that this has had no value. Even though group work has been time-consuming, conflict-producing and frustrating, it has also been professionally enriching, according to student evaluation.

One problem in particular has been difficult to handle in some groups: participants who are out for a free ride. Where the problem has been dealt with openly, this has contributed to a solution and to an improvement in working climate as such. Still, it is a fact that some students contribute relatively little and others much to the final outcome and the process itself.

Some students are of the opinion that the professional outcome of project work in core groups may be so so, whereas the social and processual experiences are very rewarding. It may be that profession and process overlap in this student evaluation - i.e. that what they term "process" is also some kind of relevant professional competence. (student report -97)

Access to qualified guidance when needed is one important prerequisite for successful work in core groups. The teacher/counsellor at the group`s disposal must be willing and able to intervene with distinct feedback when asked to. She has to give clear messages as to what is professionally approvable, and what is not, students say in their evaluation of the course. (student report -97)

2. Has the work in the core group helped develop the participants` competence as teachers?

The answer to this question naturally depends upon what is meant by teacher competence. If being willing and able to listen to other people`s opinions and wishes, to submit to majority rule even when disagreeing heartily, to compromise, to receive help from colleagues when needed, in short, be a team worker, if these are important parts of teacher competence; then the answer is definitely yes. However, if teacher competence goes more in the direction of: handling classroom defeats and victories alone, planning based on textbook and own experience alone, being more concerned with the fate of own ideas in interdisciplinary cooperation than with the overall benefit of the pupils, being evaluated as a teacher on the basis of individual achievements and not on the ability to cooperate; then the answer is no, teacher education and training would fare better with less importance attached to work in core groups.

The problem with the question is that the respondents to a very small degree have alternative ways of working to compare with. What still gives validity to the answers is the fact that most of the students have teaching experience and thus know what type of competence is relevant. It is therefore important for the evaluation of the trial program that the majority of students estimate work in core groups as important for the development of their own competence as teachers. It may be that just because these students have teaching experience, this more

experience-based group discussion is extra rewarding. Students without this experience may not feel the same about this part of the program. (student report -97)

In any case, there is no doubt whatsoever that the new curricula for elementary and secondary schools stress the importance of teachers` ability to work in teams with interdisciplinary projects. (Core Curriculum for Primary, Secondary and Adult Education in Norway).

3. What has been the effect of both giving and receiving colleague counselling, to and from academic as well as vocational teachers?

This may be the area in which this trial program for combined teacher education has had the greatest effect. The effect has been significant, both because the students have learnt a lot from each other about what is important in their teaching careers, but also because through this way of organizing the course, we have been able to utilize a resource among students that other teacher education programs have been able to utilize to a much lesser extent. Student reports say that receiving feedback from fellow students, particularly students with a different professional competence than their own, has been very instructive. It often happens that a fellow student, who has committed herself to giving feedback, see different aspects and connections than yourself. By paying attention to such feedback, own consciousness about own behavior is extended and made clearer, students say.
Giving feedback is also rewarding, and a new experience to many, at least on this level. It is demanding, among other things because your attention has to be directed both towards the case in study and towards the person who is to receive the counselling. Our experience is that when students enter their new role as counsellors, most people focus more on giving their "expert" opinion about what is going on in the classroom than on how the person being counselled justifies her actions. Students find it most satisfying, both to have some of their own presuppositions confirmed and others invalidated. Being evaluated by fellow students is a good starting point for learning and further development as a teacher, sudents say in their reports.

However, close follow-up of the core groups is absolutely necessary to make them practice the prescribed method on all points. (Handal og Lauvås,1996)

The groups need to be made aware of the importance of giving specific orders to their counsellor to make her feedback to-the-point and to raise the general level of pedagogical reflection. Our experience, at Agder College, is that the college teachers of pedagogy have an important responsibility to sharpen the student requirements, and to contribute with feedback on the general development of the group as such.
It is also our experience with this trial program, that at schools where counselling by colleagues is being actively used as part of teacher training, the effect rubs off on the entire faculty. This may have the possible future effect that the method is introduced as an ordinary form of self inflicted further development within the teaching profession.

4. Has this combined program for teacher training helped bridge the gap between the cultures of academic and vocational teachers?

This was originally the main purpose of the experiment, not just to level out differences, but more to utilize the potential in the very differences themselves. Student reports seem to underline the value of the opportunity to meet and face the other teacher type personality. A great variety of fundamental issues and questions have been raised and made relevant throughout this first half of the study program, in discussion sessions and in the planning of various tasks pertinent to this teacher education project.

Whether this will contribute to improving the status of vocational lines of study, is hard to say. However, we have experienced a growing feeling of reciprocity which gives promises for an increased understanding that both groups, together, have important contributions to make in the Norwegian upper secondary school system.

To teach this combined class of student teachers has also been a special experience for the college teachers of pedagogy since most of the students have a teaching position already. This has given a unique opportunity to focus on the relationship between theory and practice. The students have brought their own experiences from the classroom with them to the theoretical sessions at the college, for discussion and examplifying. Likewise have theoretical stuff from lectures been immediately transplanted to the classroom, for testing or control. This situation has provided unique pedagogical opportunities, opportunities that may not have been fully exploited, according to our students. (Student report -97).

5. Future implications

We can foresee further development of the post-graduate teacher education in two directions, based on our preliminary experiences with the above described trial program. First, we believe that the future education will focus more on the theory-practice dimension than what has been the case in traditional teacher training. The main goal is to create a realistic, fruitful interaction between classroom experiences and the theoretical field, the way we see it described in books and research reports. Second, we think it is of paramount importance to further develop the system of colleague counselling. This method holds great pedagogical potential, also to release an important student resource within teacher training. Through the creation of good environments for mutual student counselling, valuable insight and opportunities for development of skills required by future school systems are gained.

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